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ABSTRACT

Third- and fifth-grade teachers in four South Carolina elementary schools identified certain students as potential high school dropouts, and indicated factors affecting their predictions for these students. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with the teachers and with 40 identified students and their parents. About 17% of sampled students were identified as potential dropouts, compared with the actual statewide school-leaving rate of 38%. The factors most frequently cited for individual children were student attitude and emotional state, ability and achievement, and home/environmental factors. The at-risk group as a whole displayed 16 tendencies, but none of these variables discriminated reliably between identified and non-identified children. Interview data suggest that identified children had not learned to "play the game," that is, had not cultivated appropriate teacher-pleasing behaviors. An examination of school practices produces an overall impression of fairly rigid procedures and lack of communication channels between teachers and students and between teachers and parents. Homework was mostly drill and rarely involved creativity or higher-order thinking skills. Instruction tended to be homogeneous with little attention to the learning needs of individual students. Teachers, parents, and students all conveyed a sense of powerlessness within the system. This paper urgently recommends that schools not attempt to label elementary school children as being at-risk. Rather than labeling children and attempting to provide remedial services, the schools should attempt to improve the learning environment for teachers and students alike, particularly with regard to empowerment. (SV)

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Warning: All Children At Risk! Early Identification of At-Risk Students in Rural and Urban Settings

According to data cited in At-Risk in South Carolina: The High School Dropout (Rowls & Lackey, 1988), about 38% of students who enter South Carolina public schools fail to complete the requirements for a high school diploma. Concern over the effect this high attrition rate has on the capability of South Carolinians to function as adults in an increasingly complex world let the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education to fund the current study on the antecedents associated with students dropping out of high school. The study attempted to determine if it was possible to identify factors in third and fifth graders which could be used to predict the probability of later school failure.

Specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

1. What factors do elementary teachers perceive to be important in predicting at-risk status, and do these attributes have applicability to early screening for students at-risk?
2. Which of the factors that have been identified in retrospective research studies of the drop-out phenomenon are related to teacher prediction of at-risk status among elementary school students and have potential applicability to early screening for students at risk?
3. To what extent do programming decisions and practices interact with the criteria identified above?

Significance of the study. The results of this study will help educators understand the complex interrelationships among teacher expectations, information sources and teacher decision making. The study indicates directions for future research and programming, and should be helpful to those persons charged with improving school programming for all students, particularly those considered to be at risk.

Delimitations of the study. The short time frame of this study restricted the findings to those of a descriptive nature. Although the study sought to determine what elementary teachers think indicates later school problems, this study was not designed to establish a casual relationship between the identified factors and later dropping out. Instead, this project focused on the teachers'

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act of predicting at-risk status itself because of the substantial research base indicating strong correlations among teacher expectations, teacher actions and consequent student achievements (Good, 1987).

Methodology

Sample

Four elementary schools from separate school districts were identified as the accessible population. Two schools were characterized as urban, two rural; two had a majority of black students, while the other two had a white majority. All four schools were classified by the South Carolina State Department of Education as being in the middle range on socio-economic indicators. All were of moderate size, ranging from 470 to 596 students.

The preliminary sample was composed of all third and fifth graders in these schools. Overall demographic data were collected on this sample by asking teachers to complete a School Success Predictor Checklist (developed for this study) and the Walker Problem Behavior Identification Checklist (Walker, 1983) on each student, and by administering the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Harris, 1984) to each child.

Teachers were also asked to make nominations for the at-risk group, using a questionnaire which asked them to name specific students likely to have difficulty completing high school and to list major factors that caused them to make that prediction for each student. They were also asked for information about the nature of the organizational structures in that classroom (e.g. homogeneous vs. heterogeneous; self-contained vs. departmentalized; class size; support services available to students) and teacher practices (e.g. parent contacts, homework, grading, use of standardized tests).

From the group of nominated at-risk students, ten students were randomly selected from each school, five each from the third and fifth grade groups. Interviews were conducted with this sub-sample of students and with as many of their parents as could be contacted, using methods of ethnographic interviewing. All of the teachers were also interviewed.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study utilized a number of descriptive procedures. Initial analysis was accomplished by computing frequencies and percentages of variable values for the total sample, the nominated sub-sample and the remainder of the sample. Percentages were also computed for third and fifth grades separately to determine if there were any observable patterns indicating possible developmental effects on any of the variables. The percentages were then presented in tabular form and inspected for patterns of difference between nominated and other students.

Detailed inspection of the interview records was undertaken for the purpose of verifying patterns discerned in the numerical analysis. Domain and taxonomic analysis (Spradley, 1979) and coding procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) were utilized to identify patterns in the interview records which could provide verification of the patterns revealed in the initial frequency data.

Illustrative quotations were identified from the recordings for use in validating the generalizations that evolved from the initial data analysis. Cross-site meta-matrices were developed using the coded information to determine if there were patterns in the responses between grade levels and among schools (Miles & Huberman, 1984). From this analysis, the researchers were able to determine the applicability of various indicators to the determination of at-risk status among students in the elementary grades.

Discussion of Results

This study sought to determine the feasibility of identifying students as early as the third and fifth grades who may be at risk of leaving high school prior to graduation, and it yielded the following results.

Teacher Perceptions of At-Risk Characteristics

The nomination analysis revealed a number of patterns with regard to teacher perceptions of at-risk students. Most of the teachers were able to identify some students they perceived to be at-risk. The factors they cited most often for individual children (in order of prevalence) related to student attitude and emotional state, ability and achievement, and home/environmental factors. Behavior problems and work habit deficiencies were factors for fewer children. No one factor emerged as pre-eminent. There was a tendency for teachers to cite home problems more often when discussing at-risk children as a general construct, but to concentrate on ability and attitude issues when talking about individual students. Patterns in nomination rates among schools indicated that rural schools may have a more significant problem than their urban counterparts. There was no difference in nomination rates when white majority schools were compared to those with a majority of black students. These findings suggest that the act of prediction, and probably the actual phenomenon of dropping out, is a complex process involving many issues and criteria.

The nomination process resulted in fewer children being perceived as potential drop-outs than the current drop-out rates would have predicted. Nomination rates averaged 16.9% (ranging from a low of 10.1% to a high of 23.8%) as compared to actual rates within the state of about 38%. This under-prediction may suggest that teachers may be more optimistic about student success than is warranted or perhaps that practices in these schools are already having an impact on drop-out rates. In any event, the possibility exists that any attempt to identify at-risk students in the elementary grades through teacher nomination may tend to under-identify children and thus fail to provide support to some children who have serious but unidentified school problems.

Patterns of Variables between At-Risk Students and Others

The nominated students were compared with other students on a large number of variables that had been suggested by the literature as related to dropping out (Natriello, 1987; Rowls & Lackey, 1988). The primary result of these comparisons is that, although nominated students as a group had higher incidences of problems on most of the

variables, none of the variables discriminated reliably between the groups. On most variables, more than half of the at-risk students could be described in terms similar to many non-nominated children.

Tendencies identified among the at-risk group indicated that the at-risk student was more likely than other students to:

1. be male than female;
2. be black than white;
3. be overage for grade;
4. have repeated one or more grades;
5. be placed in a below-grade level reading book in the basal series;
6. demonstrate difficulty in the reader being used for reading instruction;
7. have failed to meet the minimum standards in reading and mathematics on the state-wide basic skills tests;
8. be rated as fair or poor on school-related tasks such as following written directions, participating in discussions, listening comprehension, and staying on task and completing assignments;
9. have received formal disciplinary notices at least once a month;
10. have been suspended;
11. exhibit problem behavior as measured by the Walker Problem Behavior Identification Checklist;
12. have changed schools at least once;
13. have fair or poor attitudes toward schools and teachers, as rated by their teachers;
14. have self-concept reports as measured by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale that are similar to the general population used for standardization;
15. be slightly less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities; and
16. come from a family headed by a single parent or some other guardian arrangement.

The above trends must, however, be viewed with caution. On every variable there were a number of children whom teachers did not consider to be at risk who nevertheless had problems with respect to that particular criterion. Conversely, every at-risk student possessed a number of characteristics that were not problematic. The most likely conclusion is that none of these variables can positively identify an at-risk child. The drop-out phenomenon is much more complex than a simplistic checklist or score can describe. These variables interact in complex ways with each other, with teacher pre-conceptions, with conventional wisdom, and with practices currently used in our schools. The practices and conditions in schools may indeed be implicated as causal agents for some of these criteria (e.g., behavior difficulties, attitude problems, work habit deficiencies, poor achievement). Attempts to treat the "variable" and not identify the true antecedents of school failure will be ineffective if not damaging.

"Playing the game". A theme that appears throughout the data on

individual students and the interview tapes was a sense that these nominated children are those who have not learned to "play the game." Teacher comments about poor student attitudes and failure to complete tasks indicate that these at-risk students have not cultivated appropriate teacher-pleasing behaviors. Teachers describe them as students who talk too much, are often out of their seats, bother others, are too noisy or talk back. Apparently, students nominated as at-risk are more likely to be those who have not learned that these annoying characteristics are counter-productive. Several of the teachers talked about their personal need for stucture and order as essential classroom elements for productive teaching to occur. It is quite clear that some of these children are often disruptive of that order.

The students' scores on the Walker Problem Behavior Identification Checklist indicate that as a group they present significant behavior problems in the areas of acting out, distractibility and disturbed peer relations. A number of them clearly have not mastered the rules of behavior necessary to be accepted in the school environment. One teacher stated explicitly that children who were able to be successful in her classroom were those who had learned "limits,... rules at school, rules at home, rules in the community - those children have learned to live with those rules." Interestingly, the data set indicated a tendency for rural schools to report higher incidences of behavior problems and disciplinary action; no reasons could be determined for this observation. In all cases however, the questions must be asked, "Are the rules appropriate and necessary? How do children learn these rules? How can we help them learn the essential rules?" Until these children learn/accept the rules, they will keep being thrown out of the game.

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale scores provide another indication that these students have not learned to "play the game." As a group, these children reported self-concepts that are normally distributed, with the group mean equal to the population mean. This suggests that half the students had tendencies to report their feelings negatively to some degree on at least some factors. The suspicion is that they were probably responding honestly to the statements without concern about what others might think. They may not have learned that one of the rules of the game is that one must make oneself look as good as possible at all costs. By contrast, the other students reported self-concepts in a strongly negatively-skewed direction, with a sample mean 0.5 standard deviations above the population mean. A number of those students answered nearly every question in the positive direction, a pattern cited by the test author as threatening the validity of the score for that individual. These students appear to have appreciated the fact that their teachers and others would be reviewing their papers, and that it is not acceptable to say you weren't happy or popular or smart. They have learned "to play the game."

Interaction of School Practices with the Drop-out Phenomenon

The study also looked at various school practices, including teacher-parent contacts, grading and promotion, homework, class organization and grouping, and minimum competency/basic skills testing, to ascertain the impact of these practices on this

nominated group of children. The overall impression is of fairly rigid procedures and lack of communication channels.

Teachers identified parent involvement as crucial to the success of a child in school. Contacts with the home generally consisted of phone calls and notes home about problems. Personal contact was minimal. Despite teacher conviction that communications were clear, parents indicated that they often do not understand what their children's grades mean. They indicated that most teacher communication was of the "problem" variety.

Although teachers had very incomplete information about family structures (single-parent, etc.) and educational levels of family members, they often faulted the home for instability and lack of supervision. They assumed that the parents had little formal education and therefore were not instilling a value for education in their children. The fact that the teachers appeared to have very little definite information about the home but nevertheless felt justified in making these judgments about the adequacy of home support is troubling.

Although there were some contradictions in the teachers' written and interview information regarding grading, the general impression is that they essentially teach, test and grade on the presupposition that some students will get A's and some will get F's. A shift in grading philosophy occurred between third and fifth grades with only half of the fifth grade teachers indicating that it was theoretically possible for all of their students to achieve a grade of "A". This finding suggests a shift from criterion evaluation to norm-referenced approaches, a trend that assures that some students will always do poorly. An additional finding indicated that the students and parents have no clear idea about what the grades mean nor how to improve them. Children and their parents generally assume that extra effort is all that is required and that when a student fails, it means he/she has not tried.

Homework is a common fact of life in all classrooms. Rather than extending classroom content and practice, it is used generally as a means for students to finish work not done in school. Teachers assume that the parents do not monitor or help with homework while parents and children on the other hand report a variety of support mechanisms available to provide help and encouragement to get the work done. Most assignments are drill and practice, generally in spelling and mathematics. Rarely are assignments creative nor do they involve higher-order thinking skills or activities designed to enrich or extend the classroom presentations. In this area which is most easily amenable to individualization, there was no indication of modification of homework to address student differences.

In all of the classes studied, virtually all instruction was provided to the entire group, even though a full range of classroom organizational patterns was represented in the sample (i.e. homogeneous and heterogeneous classrooms, self-contained and departmentalized). In most of the classes, the students were reading out of the same book. The inadequate oral reading performance of many of the nominated students during the interview suggests that the uniform reading level in the classroom is not defensible and that the learning needs of individual students are remaining unaddressed. There were no references to individualization with the exception of pull-out programs for

compensatory and special education, and the teachers voiced frustration with these programs which they say disrupt their instructional time with the children.

The effect of basic skills testing was a major concern, particularly among teachers. Universal frustration was evident with the restrictions placed on their instruction by the state-wide testing program as well as by district objectives and correlated criterion-referenced tests. Teachers said that they are restricted in tailoring instruction to meet student needs and interests because of the "time table" imposed by the tests. The heavy emphasis on isolated objectives and skill sheets seemed to contribute to considerable stress, to the extent that many of the teachers cried during the interviews when discussing this issue. Despite the importance attributed to "the tests" by teachers, it was very surprising that a significant number of them did not know whether their students had met the minimum standards for reading and mathematics during the latest testing period. Since schools in South Carolina are mandated to provide remediation to students not meeting the state standard, one must assume that some children are not getting those minimum support services.

"Who's in control?" A recurring theme throughout the interview records pertained to the issue of power and control. The interviews conveyed a pervasive sense of powerlessness. The teachers were eloquent in their frustration with the system. They believe that they know what will help these children learn, but they do not believe they have the power to change procedures to accomplish that goal. The students struggle mightily to meet the demands of all the adults in their lives without feeling like they have any choices or control. They spoke often of others telling them what to do. Their surprise at the interviewers' questions about what they would change about teachers and schools indicated that they are not used to being consulted on issues that affect them. They struggle to "pull up their grades" even though they have no conception of what that means nor how they can get help to do it. Parents feel they are doing what the schools ask: they monitor homework and grades; they talk to their children about the importance of doing well in school; they understand and reward the effort their children put in, at least at home. Even so, they feel powerless to affect the system that is so crucial to their children's survival. One parent suggested that the schools ask the parents what to do. Several others used the interview opportunity to "sound off" about apparent injustices they saw in the system. The implication is that they never felt they had a forum for these complaints/suggestions before, that they are not heard by the system, that they are powerless to affect the system. They want someone to listen. They want some power and control. Without control, none of the actors in this drama will be able to meet their basic needs of belonging, power, freedom and fun (Glasser, 1986).

Recommendations

The most urgent recommendation resulting from this study is that our schools NOT attempt to label specific children in the elementary grades as being at-risk. This data base suggests that difficulties

with positive identification and the potential for both under- and over-identification of children make this practice ethically untenable. Extensive research regarding teacher expectations (Good, 1987) suggests that once a child is labeled, self-fulfilling prophecies may assure that the negative outcome of dropping-out actually occurs. Labeling children has consistently been shown to be more often harmful than helpful. Rather than labeling children as at-risk and attempting to provide remedial services for those specific children, the schools would be well advised to devote efforts to improving the learning environment for everyone - teachers and students alike.

Secondly, schools should not establish additional pull-out programs for the purpose of providing categorical services to children experiencing difficulties in school. Teachers in this study consistently indicated in many ways that fragmentation of programs and their school day already is reaching the critical stage. The experience base in special education programs for mildly handicapped students suggests that effective services can be provided in the mainstream context. Fragmentation and lack of transfer result when various professionals serve students without collaboration. The end result is that children become less capable, not more. The alternative is to modify general classroom and school programs to better meet the educational needs of <u>all</u> children. The exact nature of these programming initiatives will depend largely on the context in which they are provided and specifically on the talents, interests and needs of all persons in the system - teachers, students, parents. The effective environment will be one that enables individuals to meet their basic needs for belonging, freedom, power and fun. It will acknowledge that individual children will make progress in different ways and on different timetables. The learning environment will be flexible in implementation and provide support for needed individualization of instruction and practice. It will acknowledge that there are many different ways to meet goals, all equally valid. It will invite participation from all parties. It will value individuality and community. It will humanize and enrich the environment for <u>all</u> children so that whenever or for whatever reason a child demonstrates special needs that might threaten his/her success in school, those needs will be met. No child should have to endure an inappropriate educational setting because he/she "doesn't qualify."

Thirdly, since research (Taylor, et al., 1989) indicates that students value having control, particularly at school, and that loss of control often is related to increased negative behavior, attempts should be made to restore a sense of control and power within the system for students and parents. This will increase the sense of ownership and personal responsibility for change and establish an environment in which that change can occur. Specific recommendations include:

1. Opportunities should be provided for students to make choices about their activities and learning. They should be actively involved in the pursuit of knowledge and skills. Use of classroom procedures such as classroom meetings (Glasser, 1969) and cooperative learning (Johnson et al., 1984) may have applicability to this goal. Staff development and curriculum development efforts will be required to support these changes.

2. Schools should look for ways to broaden their focus and approaches to parent-teacher communication, adopting a more collaborative approach. Traditionally, the communications have been one-sided - professional to layman - with the result that messages are misinterpreted in many cases. Parents are often quite perceptive and knowledgeable about and invested in their children's progress and problems. Just because the perceptions of parents and teachers are not always congruent does not mean that either party is in error. The validity of different perspectives must be appreciated and used for the improvement of services to children. Mechanisms should be sought that allow parents to participate as full partners in the work of raising and educating their children.

Fourthly, a number of staff development topics are suggested by this study, including:

1. Examination of the kinds and uses of student information the schools and prior teachers provide to current teachers, and the development of recommendations for improving the quality of information available to teachers for planning instruction to more effectively meet student needs;
2. Evaluation of classroom and school grading practices with respect to their purpose and effectiveness; consideration of changes in grading policies and practices that will help teachers, students and parents better understand the information provided and use that information to improve student performance;
3. Examination of the process of making placements in the basal reading series, and development of more effective procedures for individualizing instruction so that all students are being instructed at an appropriate level and thus be more likely to be successful in learning to read; and
4. Consideration of school/teacher behavior management practices to determine if they are reasonable and necessary to maintain an effective working environment; development of alternative management approaches that highlight the need to prevent confrontation by making the environment conducive to learning and appropriate behavior.

Finally, organizational structures should be developed within schools and districts that will establish a sense of control and power within the work place for teachers. Teachers who have a real sense of ownership and responsibility for change will be more likely to work actively to see that change occurs. The sense of powerlessness among teachers is overwhelming. Because they believe they have no control or power, teachers today are abdicating responsibility in great numbers. Even when they stay in the classroom, they become technicians at best. The "top-down" model of school administration drawn from models of accountability used in the business world has failed our schools. Just as industry is beginning to appreciate the power of workers' input and decision-making in improving productivity, so must the schools. A possible model is the "Quality Circle" concept used in the work place in Japan (Juran & Gryna, 1988). This concept holds that groups of workers can effectively pool talents and solve problems in the work place. One can conceive of grade and department level teams in school buildings being empowered to make curricular and management decisions and to design innovative solutions to

context-specific problems. The positive impact of these practices will be derived from the perception workers (i.e. teachers) have that they have real power, that their thoughts, ideas, solutions are taken seriously, that they can control relevant activities within their work environment.

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